

Australian doctors condemn government response to COVID-19 “disaster”

Mike Head
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Thousands of doctors across Australia have signed open letters to the federal government demanding an immediate national lockdown and the urgent pouring of resources into the public hospitals in order to “avert disaster” even worse than that in Italy.

The alarm raised by the doctors, who are on the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic, is an indictment of the federal and state governments, Liberal-National Coalition and Labor Party alike, which are refusing to take urgently needed measures to protect the public.

Governments at all levels are pouring billions of dollars into the protecting the corporate elite via “stimulus packages.” Yet education facilities and other large workplaces remain open and no comprehensive program of testing has been implemented to even ascertain the extent of infection within the population.

At least 2,500 doctors have signed one letter, circulated by Dr Hemant Garg, saying they are “dismayed at the disconnect between the actions being taken within the medical community and the recommendation for actions being passed on to the general population...”

“We should immediately recommend a three- to four-week closure of schools, cultural and religious places, including places of worship, gyms and leisure centres, pubs, bars, theatres, cinemas and concert halls,” the letter states. “This would allow a steady declaration of cases of coronavirus to present to hospitals and fever clinics as their symptomatic phase develops.”

Almost 4,000 medical professionals and experts have signed another letter, drafted by intensive care specialist Greg Kelly, warning that more than 12,000 people in Australia would be infected with the virus by April 4, “on current growth rates.”

This letter warns that even more severe health crisis can only be prevented by “heeding the lessons of other

countries.” That includes “immediately implementing the strict measures of lockdown and social distancing that have shown to be effective” and “preparing our health systems for a surge of COVID 19 and critically ill patients.”

In hospitals, the measures needed include “an immediate reduction in elective work, increased frequency and intensity of hospital cleaning, measures to temporarily increase intensive care capacity and increasing protective equipment for staff.”

With reported infections doubling every three to five days, there would “be 750 on Friday, 1,500 on Tuesday next week, 3,000 next Saturday, 6,000 on the 1st of April and 12,000 by the 4th of April,” the letter states.

Australia’s healthcare system would be “in a worse position than Italy” should the predictions come to fruition, the doctors warn.

The letter reports that doctors in the Lombardy region, which is the richest in Italy, with a health system equal to Australia’s, describe their situation as like being “in a war zone.”

They are “completely overwhelmed” and unable to “provide intensive care to previously healthy seventy-year-olds.”

So far, more than 2,500 people have died from complications relating to COVID-19 in Italy. Because of inadequate resources, the death toll is rising because doctors are forced to choose between which patients to treat and which to let die.

“With access to intensive care the death rate from COVID-19 is likely less than 1 percent, but in an overwhelmed system without access to intensive care the death rate approaches 4 percent,” the letter warns.

Paul Kelly, Australia’s Deputy Chief Medical Officer, said on Monday anywhere between 20 and 60 percent of the population could catch coronavirus and

up to 150,000 could die, based on a mortality rate of 1 percent. The toll could be four times higher if the doctors' warnings are not heeded.

"Many of us are in contact with colleagues in Italy, Spain and France and they are begging us to learn from their mistakes," the letter says.

The doctors cite China, Singapore, Korea and Taiwan as examples of where widespread economic lockdown and social distancing have significantly reduced transmission rates.

The doctors declare: "We are especially concerned about impacts on indigenous communities given their high rates of pre-existing illnesses and limited health infrastructure." Indigenous people suffered more than 10 percent of all the deaths in Australia that were attributed to the 2009 "Swine Flu" epidemic, despite accounting for less than 3 percent of the population.

The doctors' warnings and pleas have been rejected by the federal and state governments. Tuesday night's national cabinet meeting decided to exempt schools, universities, public transport, airports and flights, shopping centres, prisons, courts and large workplaces—office buildings, factories, construction sites and mining sites—from their belated calls for a halt to indoor gatherings of more than 100 people.

Equally, the doctors' letters have been buried by the complicit corporate media, with only isolated reports.

To confirm the doctors' concern, there is mounting evidence that, after decades of cuts and under-funding by federal and state governments, public hospitals are seriously unprepared for the looming calamity.

In Queensland, doctors and nurses have been told that the hospitals are running so low on personal protective equipment (PPE) that they should reuse some items, such as gloves, gowns, eye shields and masks.

"As the COVID-19 situation evolves, it has become apparent PPE levels are very low—based on current usage," the letter from Queensland Clinical Senate chair Alex Markwell and Clinical Networks Executive chair Liz Kenny reads.

"What we would do in optimal circumstances is no longer sustainable or fit for purpose. Re-use of PPE in low-risk situations, for instance, may be a better alternative than no PPE at all."

Clinicians told the *Brisbane Times* it was concerning that stocks were already "very low," given health authorities had modelling that showed 25 percent of

Queensland's population, or about one million people, would be infected by the disease.

The initiative taken by the doctors, and its rejection by the parliamentary representatives of big business, confirm the necessity for health professionals and workers, like all other workers, to take matters into their own hands, in order to protect the population.

As explained in the statements issued by the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Parties, the health, safety and needs of working people must take absolute priority over all considerations of corporate profit and private wealth.

Health workers need to join other workers in forming rank-and-file workplace and community committees to ensure free testing and first-class medical treatment for all and safe working conditions.

This requires the shutdown of non-essential production, and measures to protect the well-being and income support of those who are laid-off, forced to quarantine or required to look after children or other vulnerable members of society.



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